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[Title Page]

THE CULT OF MUMBO IN CENTRAL AND SOUTH KAVIRONDO.

By "Nyangweso."

124 Owing to the African's habit of giving the answer he imagines to be the one required instead of the real answer to a question, it has been a little difficult to sift fact from fiction as regards the Mumbo cult. A further complication is that in this religion, as in others, there are different sects who hold their own views as to the interpretation of the teachings of the founder. I have however endeavoured, after several interviews with members of the cult, and with others in a position to give reliable information, to eliminate minor local divergencies of belief, and to give a broad outline of the main beliefs and practices of the Mumboites.

745 In 1913, there lived in the Central Kavirondo location of Alego, a man named Onyango Dunde, of the Asuja clan. One evening as he sat in his hut, a gigantic snake appeared and swallowed him up. It was so big that as it stood on end in the lake (Lake Victoria) its head reached up into the clouds. Almost immediately afterwards it vomited Onyango back again into his hut, unscathed but rather shaken. Indeed it appears that this was just the snake's method of drawing Onyango's attention to the fact that it wished to speak with him, which it proceeded at once to do. It spoke more or less as follows:—

"I am the God Mumbo whose two homes are in the Sun and in the Lake. I have chosen you to be my mouth-piece. Go out and tell all Africans—and more especially the people of Alego—that from henceforth I am their God. Those whom I chose personally, and also those who acknowledge me, will live for ever in plenty. Their crops will grow of themselves and there will be no more need to work. I will cause cattle, sheep, and goats to come up out of the lake in great numbers to those who believe in me, but all unbelievers and their families and cattle will die out.

[124] "The Christian religion is rotten (mbovu) and so is its practice of making its believers wear clothes. My followers must let their hair grow—never cutting it. Their clothes shall be the skins of goats and cattle and they must never wash. All Europeans are your enemies, but the time is shortly coming when they will all disappear from our country.

"Daily sacrifice—preferably the males—of cattle, sheep, goats, and fowls shall be made to me. More especially do I prefer black bulls. Have no fear of sacrificing these as I will cause unlimited black cattle to come to you from the Lango (Masai, Nandi, and Lumbwa).

Lastly, my followers must immediately slaughter all their cattle, sheep, and goats. When this is done, I will provide them with as many more as they want from the Lake." Having said this, the snake disappeared into the lake.

Onyango soon set about spreading his gospel and, as was natural with so attractive a programme, it was not long before he had a considerable following. They were divided into what may be described as two Degrees. The First Degree consisted of those personally "called" in very much the same way as Onyango had been "called." They were all men, mostly older men and the heads of Bomas. The "call" consisted in their throwing some kind of fit, possibly an ecstacy of religious exaltation, during which words poured from them in an unintelligible torrent. They became the priests and were in tremendous demand as witch-doctors since they soon were invested with, or themselves assumed supernatural powers.

For example, they were reputed to be able to recall to life a dying person or one who had just died. The procedure here began with the priest's acceptance of a goat as his fee. The patient, or corpse was stretched on the ground and lightly covered with freshly cut grass, some of which was twisted into a thick rope round the neck. This rope was called "Boombwe."

The goat was next sacrificed and its blood sprinkled over the grass, the while the priest called loudly on Mumbo to save the dying man or to restore to life the corpse—as the case might be, generally with but indifferent success.

The Second Degree consisted of all the dependants, male and female, of those especially "Called" by Mumbo himself, and also any other people who, although not specifically "Called," chose to join the cult.

At sunrise and at sunset all Mumboites stand facing the sun with the first finger and thumb of each hand meeting to form a circle and held up to the eyes like binoculars. Having gazed at the sun intensely until they are completely dazzled, they stretch out their arms towards it and break into rapid and often unintelligible prayer. This is interesting in that the ancient Luo religion was—and in places still is—that of sun worship. Occasionally when they feel like it they also pray thus to the Lake, and even, it is said, sacrifice cattle, throwing the meat into the Lake to the crocodiles.

As was to be expected from a retrogressive religion which not only encouraged but ordained idleness and uncleanliness, it was not long before its adherents, having nothing to do or to think about, began to indulge in unpleasant practices which the normal Jaluo, however uncivilised he might be, held in abhorrence. The communal enjoyment of women, including incest, bhang smoking, sodomy, and even bestiality, all made their appearance, though these practices seem to

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have been more common in South Kavirondo whither the cult had spread and had been received with enthusiasm.

The priests started " schools " which they usually placed on hill-tops, and in the best proselytising traditions, attracted potential adherents by giving feasts of their slaughtered cattle. They also built here and there what might be called groves or places for the worship of Mumbo where sacrifices were made to the accompaniment of many obscenities and dancing.

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In some of these Groves were wooden idols, one of which has been presented to the Natural History Museum by Mr. C. M. Dobbs, late Provincial Commissioner for Nyanza Province. This practice of constructing sacred Groves to Mumbo and erecting idols is interesting since all the people who were questioned about this cult said definitely that such things had never been commanded by Mumbo himself. True, he had said that there were to be sacrifices made to him with dancing to the accompaniment of drums and bull-roarers (without musical accompaniment), but he meant them to take place in each boma. No instructions had been given for groves or idols.

An extract from the report of the District Officer who found the idol is worth inserting at this point:—

" . . . .The meeting place of the cult consisted of a beautifully swept enclosure adjoining the High Priest's Boma and capable of seating some two hundred people. From the next boma to that of the High Priest ran a made path, four feet wide and trenched at the sides . . . . The enclosure was surrounded by a well-built dry stone wall. In the centre was a little semi-open hut about six feet in diameter, finished with white mud . . . . There was no door, it appeared symmetrical all round, thus:—

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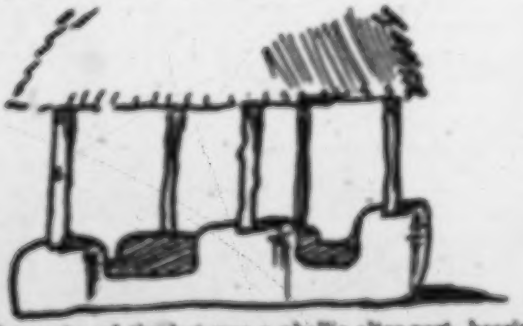

" In the centre of the hut was a phallic altar-post, bearing traces of blood-stains . . . . The High Priest's daughter produced some unpleasant animal relics from a hole in the wall in the enclosure. In the Western corner a bush plant (Nyalothkoth) had been planted. . . .

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In the Eastern corner was a small length of inner wall covered with dry grass, from which a shrub was growing so as to leave a covered but hollow space between the walls.

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The altar-post mentioned in the report and which is now in the Museum, is a piece of wood standing some 3½ to 4 feet high and about 5 or 6 inches in diameter. One end has been carved with the result that it appears to be an unmistakeable phallus. That this is intentional, however, has been strongly denied by all those questioned about it, and, from the manner of my informants, I am inclined to believe that what they say is true—as far as it goes, and for the following reasons. In every Luo boma the cattle are tied up at night to wooden posts embedded in the ground. Each beast as a rule has a post—called in Dholuo, "Loch,"—to itself. Where the owner of [531] the boma has an exceptionally fine bullock he marks it out for distinction by putting a metal bell—not unlike a Swiss cattle-bell—round it's neck and further he carves it an especially ornamental Loch. This carving is almost invariably phallic in shape, and I expect that the idol in the Museum was probably a loch uprooted from a nearby boma.

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The point which was stressed to me was that although nearly all carved Loches appear to be undeniably phallic, yet this is entirely accidental and has no intended sexual symbolism or meaning whatsoever. It was just the custom to carve them thus.

Now I am prepared to believe that the phallic appearance of these Loches is produced unconsciously and without sexual significance, but, considering the geographical origin of the Luo and further the nature of the Mumbo beliefs, I consider that it is more than probable that the Loches in their present-day domestic capacity are the unconscious relics of phallic cults and practices handed down from unremembered antiquity, and have by now lost all their former phallic meaning. That they have been seized on as symbols in this religion is not surprising when one considers firstly their probable origin, which I have just indicated, and secondly the fact that the gospel of Mumboism in its promises of plenty without having to work for it (the phallus always having been the symbol of Fertility and Plenty) is typical of all phallic religions. If their choice of a phallus for a symbol is not an unconscious re-emergence of long forgotten rites, then it is an extremely interesting instinctive gesture that their choice of emblem should coincide with that of other and unconnected races who hold parallel beliefs.

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It would seem then that Mumboism is a mixture of the old Luo religion of sun worship, and of an even older religion, long forgotten in the mists of Time and now reappearing in a new guise.

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The prophecies of Mumbo having failed, the cult is dying out, especially in Central Kavirondo, though it appears to be rather more tenacious in South Kavirondo. Further, active discouragement by the Government and the work of the Missions will soon banish it

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altogether. It gains very few new converts and nearly all of these are natives who have broken away from a native-run Christian Mission known as the Nomiya Luo Mission, but these are not very numerous.

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In conclusion I would like to offer my explanation of the nature of the "Snake" which swallowed Onyango. One morning in April this year while at Asembo location, on the Lake-shore, I happened to look out towards Homa Mountain on the other side of the Kavirondo Gulf. About a mile from the mountain and over the lake hung low a small bank of clouds. It was about half-past eight in the morning. From the centre of the clouds, and reaching down tenuously to the lake, twisting and swaying, hung a water-spout. The distance, some fifteen miles, made it difficult to estimate its height, but I think that a fair guess would be from 350 to 400 feet. I turned to my interpreter and said, "What do the wats make of that?" and he replied, "Oh, they say that that is the great snake Mumbo!"